Brahms and Wolf as Lyrists. II (Continued)

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BRAHMS AND WOLF AS LYRISTS.

BY ERNEST NEWMAN.

(Continued from September number, p. 525.)

II.

That Brahms as a lyricist was too much dominated by purely instrumental notions of form will be disputed by no one who has studied his songs in connection with those of a master of a more flexible lyrical speech, like Wolf. Brahms's devotion to German folk-song also helped to give his lyrical phrases occasionally not only a square-toed tread that sorts ill with the natural values of the words, but a contour that inevitably leads to falsities of musico-verbal form somewhere or other in the course of the song. Let me illustrate this last fault by a quotation or two. For me, even so beautiful a song as 'An die Nachtigall' (Op. 46, No. 4) is marred by it. The great masters of form instinctively divine at a glance all the possibilities and impossibilities of a theme; as Pater would say, they see the last line in the first. But in this song, as elsewhere, Brahms has certainly not seen much beyond his first line when he shaped the melodic phrase for this. Hölty's poem is couched in a form in which pairing short lines alternate with pairing long lines:

Geuss' nicht so laut der liebentflammten Lieder
Tonreichen Schall
Vom Blütenast des Apfelbaums hernieder,
O Nachtigall.*
&c., &c.

The verbal sense, as will be seen, runs on continuously to the end of the third line. Perhaps it would be too much to expect of a song composer that he should model so long a lyric sentence as this; but our sense of verbal fitness would certainly not tolerate any pause before the end of the second line. Conscious of this, Brahms projects his main lyrical contour thus:

Ex. 1. *Rather slowly.*

Geuss' nicht so laut der lieb-ent-flammten
Lie - der ton - rei - chen Schall

It is an expressive line, and not the least admirable feature of it is the augmentation on 'tonreichen

Schall,' that gives just the effect of rhythmic deliberation that a reader with an ear for poetic rhythm would give to this line of the poem; the full rich vowel of 'ton' itself invites delay. But in his anxiety to model this first melodic figure accurately upon the rhythm and the sense of the first two lines of the poem, Brahms has not looked far enough ahead. Had he done so,—as Wolf would instinctively have done,—he would have seen that he would either have to abandon this rhythmical model later, or adapt it to the changing verbal values of the new lines. His lyrical technique being insufficiently flexible for this, Brahms keeps doggedly to the original pattern, regardless of the jars he thereby necessarily gives to a sensitive listener. The metrical augmentation seen at 'tonreichen Schall' suits very well the 'O Nachtigall' of the fourth line:

Ex. 2.

Vom Blüt - hen - ast des Ap - fel-baums her -
- nie - der, O Nach - ti - gall.

But already the three-crotchets rest between the end of the second line and the beginning of the third, and the reverting to the rightly arresting melodic contour of the first line for the merely subsidiary words of the third, interpose too great a gulf between this third line and its predecessor. And as he goes on, Brahms's resolve to hold on like grim death to his original pattern compels him to pile falsity on falsity. At first we see him, though perhaps a little too much preoccupied with the figure, turning it to really vital uses, as in the fourth line of the second stanza:

Ex. 3.

denn schon durch-bebt die Tie-fen mei-ner See - le
dein schmel - zend Ach!

where the sense of melodic and harmonic change in conjunction with the rhythmic reminiscence is admirable. But in the third stanza the preoccupation becomes a blind obsession, and everything goes wrong:

Dann flieht der Schlaf von neuem dieses Lager,
Ich starre dann
Mit nassem Blick und totenbleich und hager
Den Himmel an.*

For a verse that suddenly brings into the song an atmosphere so different from the earlier one, Brahms's melodic line is far too much like that of the first stanza to be effective. This is one of the hundred cases in which his unthinking, mechanical partiality for the strophic form has led him astray.

* Literally, line by line:

Pour not out so loudly of love-inflamed song
A tone-rich sound
Down from the blossoming branch of the apple tree,
O Nightingale.

* Then sleep again flies from this bed of mine;
Then I stare
With a moist [tearful] gaze, and deathly pale and haggard,
At heaven.

But apart from that, the original rhythmic fragment to which I have so often referred has not only by this time become something of a nuisance,—a sort of King Charles's head that refuses to go out of poor Mr. Dick's mind,—but it plays havoc with the poem :

Ex. 4.

Dann flieht der Schlaf von neu-em dies-es
La-ger, ich star-re dann, mit nas-sem
Blick und tod-ten-bleich und ha-ger den
Him-mel an.

As before, Brahms runs his melodic phrase to the length of two lines of the verse; but the continuity between the second crotchet and the minim of bar 4 of Ex. 1, that was justified by the fact that the first two lines of the poem were in a sense only one,—‘tonreichen Schall’ being, indeed, only the object of the verb ‘geuss,’—is quite unjustifiable in the third stanza. The first idea definitely ends with ‘Lager’; the pause, if it is to occur anywhere, should come here. But Brahms, still obsessed by the figure that first fascinated him, plumps it toe-down on the heels of the preceding phrase without a second’s breathing space. This of itself gives a singular ungainliness to the first two lines. But the relentless switching-on of ‘ich starre dann’ to the line to which it does not belong, necessarily separates it from the following line, to which it belongs by right. And then, to crown all, the ‘den Himmel an,’ once more in obedience to a merely mechanical instinct, is too widely separated from what goes before it. The whole setting of the verse is, in truth, a monument of bad taste and poor feeling for form; a stanza that has only one real half pause-point—at the end of the first line,—and in which the idea begun in the second line does not complete itself until the fourth (for the third line is a parenthesis), is chopped up recklessly in order to comply with a metrical scheme that had been prompted by a stanza of a totally different build. In the next verse, that follows the pattern of the second * :

Ex. 5.

Fleuch Nach-ti-gall, in grü-ne Fin-ster-nis-se, in's
Hain-ge-sträuch,

though no violence is done to the verbal sense by the retention of the figure 1A, Brahms is misled by it into laying an almost comical stress on the first syllable of ‘*Haingesträuch*.’

* Fly, nightingale, into the green obscurity,
Into the bushes of the grove.

But at the end there comes a touch that is worthy of Wolf himself :

Und spend’ im Nest der treuen Gattin Küsse ;
Entfleuch, entfleuch ! *

Here Brahms, as earlier at the words ‘dein schmelzend Ach,’ preserves the formal unity of the song by suggesting the vital fragment 1A, but gives it quite a new and exquisitely expressive and appropriate turn :

Ex. 6.

Ent-fleuch, ent-fleuch !

Brahms’s curious carelessness in the building of his phrases may be illustrated again from ‘Ruhe, Süßliebchen’ (Op. 33, No. 9). He first of all establishes in our minds a two-bar rhythm by means of the following prelude for the pianoforte :

No. 7.

Adagio.
pp

Then he begins the vocal melody thus :

No. 8.

Ru-he, Süß-lieb-chen, im Schat-ten der
grün-en, däm-mer-nden Nacht.

Now the poem is one of those thousands in which the line-divisions do not always correspond with the sense-divisions :

Ruhe, Süßliebchen, im Schatten
Der grünen, dämmernden Nacht ;
Es säuselt das Gras auf den Matten,
Es fächelt und kühlt dich der Schatten,
Und treue Liebe wacht. †

Brahms is aware of this; so, as will be seen from Ex. 8, he carefully refrains from making or suggesting a pause-point at ‘Schatten.’ The melodic sense, like the verbal sense, runs on. But he has only escaped Scylla to fall into Charybdis. Dominated by the feeling that the first proper pause-point is after ‘Süßliebchen,’ he plans a two-bar melodic phrase extending to this point, and fails to notice that the repetition of this two-bar period lands him in the falsity of a pause-point after ‘grünen.’ It is of no avail to reply that the melody does not actually pause there, but runs straight on with ‘dämmernden Nacht.’ There may be no visible pause, none that is indicated in the notation; but the effect of the preceding four two-bar phrases is inevitably to suggest a cadential point after ‘grünen,’ and to make the two remaining

* And lavish kisses in the nest of thy true mate ;
Fly away, fly away !

† Literally :

Rest, sweetheart, in the shadow
Of the green, to-twilight-drawing night ;
The grass murmurs on the meadows,
The shadow fans and cools thee,
And true love watches over thee.

words and the melody of them seem to limp in lamely in a kind of afterthought.

The orthodox Brahmins no doubt will tell us, with the pitying condescension they always exhibit towards the unbeliever, that if a song is generally beautiful we ought not to trouble ourselves unduly over minutiae such as these. But with all respect to the high-priesthood, they are not minutiae, and no one whose sense of form in the lyric is at all developed can fail to be troubled by them, for they seriously mar the beauty of the songs for him. Of themselves they would serve to make him doubt the catchword that Brahms was a consummate master of form. Whenever, indeed, a really modern problem of form confronts Brahms in the song, he fails to solve it, largely because his rhythmic sense—*pace* the Brahmins—was so limited. I know that to say this is like committing the unforgivable sin; but all the same it is true. As I have already pointed out, a good deal of what currently passes for rhythmical subtlety in Brahms,—such as his alternations of duple and triple times,—is merely metrical fidgetiness or mannerism. As so often happened in his case, it was not that he was the master of the form but that the form was master of him. Take, as an example, the interposition of some bars of triple beat into the main six-eight time at the end of the song 'Von ewiger Liebe' (Op. 43, No. 1). This is not originality; it adds nothing to the expression of the song; it is not in the least vital to the song. Anyone who knows Brahms's work as a whole can see that it is pure mannerism; he is like a man with some nervous habit of hand or mouth, who for the life of him cannot keep from twitching while he is talking to you. And if anyone wants to realise how objectionable this mannerism of Brahms is, let him spend a day going through one work after another of the composer. Before many hours are over he will be so tired of the trick that when he sees it coming, five bars ahead, he will flee from it as we dodge down a side street at the sight of a notorious bore, who, as we know too well, will want to inflict on us the story he has been telling everyone for weeks.

No candid student of Brahms will deny that his sense of lyrical rhythm is a primitive thing compared with that of Wolf. Primarily, as I have tried to indicate, the defect comes from Brahms's limited command of form; he has so little notion of how to shape and handle themes that are at once musically interesting and true to poetic metric, that at all costs he stays within the narrow frame of the folk-song, complacently perpetrating all sorts of metrical absurdities rather than leave the safe haven of the four-square.* But it is not only in this respect that his sense of form in the lyric seems painfully circumscribed in comparison with that of Wolf. I am not contending that Brahms should have written in Wolf's idiom, any more than I would contend that Keats should have tried

to write like Wordsworth. But I certainly hold that no modern composer has the right to be regarded as a consummate master of form who slavishly works upon the same pattern and uses the same mechanical devices in song after song, as Brahms does. Here again it is a question of mannerism. There are mannerisms and mannerisms,—some that do not matter much, and some that matter a great deal. Even the greatest composers have their unconscious little tricks; the only question is whether the trick moves us to merely an indulgent smile or a shrug of impatience and irritation. There is one *cliché* of Brahms that, for me at any rate, becomes less tolerable each time I go through the songs,—his habit of a harmonic darkening in the second or third stanza of a lyric. The reader will see what I mean by looking at the third stanza ('Durch todt Wüsten wandle hin') of 'Wie bist du, meine Königin.' It is a device to which Brahms resorts far too often; sometimes it is the whole stanza that is treated in this way, sometimes only a phrase in it. Examples of it will be seen in 'Feldeinsamkeit' (at the words 'Mir ist, als ob ich längst gestorben bin'), the 'Minnelied' (Op. 71, No. 5, third stanza), the 'Vergebliches Ständchen,' 'O wüsst' ich doch den Weg zurück' (last two lines), and elsewhere. It is not the device in itself that stirs one's impatience, for of course every composer uses changes of harmonic colour for special purposes of expression. In Brahms what chills and wearies us is the frequent repetition of the trick in almost the same style, and the sense of limited resource, of slavery to a mannerism, that this inevitably conveys.

So again with his other mannerisms, his syncopated accompaniments, for instance, or—a very wearisome trick, this—his syncopated interludes between the lines or the verses, of the type of those in the 'Sapphische Ode,' 'An die Nachtigall' (Op. 46, No. 4), and 'Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer.' It is impossible for me, at any rate, to regard the art of a man with so many *clichés* as Brahms had as exhibiting a 'wider and more complete view of lyric singing' than the many-sided, changeful, endlessly resourceful art of Hugo Wolf. Nor is Brahms's view of lyric singing any wider in the emotional than it is in the technical aspect. I can refer only to my own experience, of course, but I give it for what it is worth. After more than twelve years' acquaintance with the songs of Wolf, I admire them more to-day than when I first met with them; after more than twenty-five years' acquaintance with the songs of Brahms, I find myself considerably cooler over them than I was at first. I doubt now whether his songs as a whole will keep their freshness as long as those of Schubert and Schumann. A good deal of his lyrical emotion, I think, is of the kind that does not endure; he is not only too obtrusively German,—in a way that Bach and Wagner are not,—but he is the German of a particular epoch, and of a particular culture-stage that has lost much of its savour for us of to-day. The Brahmins laud him for having sunk the roots of his lyric into

* I am speaking, of course, in broad terms. Nor should I dream of denying the beautiful *workmanship* of the songs as a whole. The forms he uses may be limited, conventional, and often very inadequate, but within those forms he is a thoroughly skilled craftsman.

German folk-song. I venture to think that, while certain of Brahms's *volkstümlich* songs are most expressive, it is to his having drunk too deeply of the German folk-spring that he owes several of his defects both of matter and of manner. At some of the latter we have already glanced; they are as a rule more or less directly traceable to the narrow forms of folk-music. But his emotional *clichés* come not less obviously from his folk-song prepossessions than his technical *clichés* do. As a lyrist he lives in an emotional world that is very restricted in comparison with that of Wolf. So far from his range being either wide or complete, he is too much the singer of the German *Jüngling* and the German *Mädchen* of the special type that flowered so charmingly during the Romantic epoch, but that has run to seed since in all art, including that of Brahms. The defect of the type is its excessive proneness to what our ancestors used to call 'sensibility.' There is just a shade too much sugar and water in their composition; they look just a shade too soulfully into each other's eyes; they dissolve just a shade too readily into tears. In several of the Brahms songs the type has certainly degenerated. And they form rather too narrow a family party to be quite acceptable to anyone who has moved about in the wider world of Wolf's types. Consanguinity is too plainly written on the features and revealed in not only the talk but the very accent of these men and women, boys and girls. The Mädchen of the 'Von ewiger Liebe' is just the Mädchen of 'Liebestreu' grown up; she is sister to the rather German philosopher who muses in the fields in 'Feldeinsamkeit' and pours out his soul in 'An die Nachtigall'; it is a relation of hers who weeps in the shadows in 'Mainacht'; it is her cousin who sighs out her consumptive soul in 'Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer.' Not only do all these people look alike and talk alike and feel alike, but they all seem to come out at the same fixed hours of the day or the night, and all see nature and mankind from just the same angle. Even when Brahms relaxes into humour, as in the 'Vergebliches Ständchen,' it is still the same world of the German student and his *Dirndl*. From a composer with a 'wide and complete view of lyric singing' we expect a little more variety of type than this. Nor can we of the 20th century readily forgive his often far too facile sentiment, a state of feeling that—I mention it in the presence of the Brahmins in fear and trembling—runs too easily with him to sentimentality and mawkishness. In my own experience it is this aspect of him, becoming more obvious as it does every year, that turns me from my old allegiance to several of his songs. I am becoming more and more impatient of what Romain Rolland has well called 'the appalling German tearfulness'—a tendency to liquescence that is not wholly unconnected, I imagine, with German beerfulness. No one who has not made a study of Brahms's songs as a whole knows the extent of his reliance on those sentimental thirds and sixths that have been the bane of German music for at least a century. At the

slightest hint of the tender or pathetic, Brahms takes to thirds and sixths as readily as the mid-Victorian female used to take to tears, and for much the same reasons. Look, for instance, at 'An ein Veilchen,' 'Dort in den Weiden,' 'Feldeinsamkeit,' 'Immer leiser wird mein Schlummer,' the 'Minnelied,' the 'Sandmännchen,' the 'Sonntag,' 'Ruhe, Süßliebchen,' 'Wie froh und frisch,' 'Es träumte mir,' 'Leise, um dich nicht zu wecken,' the 'Wiegenlied' ('Guten Abend, gut' Nacht') 'Erinnerung,' 'O wüsst' ich doch den Weg zurück,' 'Bei dir sind meine Gedanken,' and 'Wie Melodien zieht es mir'—to take a few examples almost at random. I beg leave to doubt whether this peculiarly Teutonic vein of sentiment will appeal to the world much longer.

In conclusion let me repeat that in this article my main concern has frankly been to play the part of the devil's advocate. I am not insensitive to the many beauties of Brahms's songs. I have simply tried to throw on him, as a singer, a light that it is hopeless ever to expect from the quasi-official Brahmsians. In his songs, whatever may be said of his other works, neither his command of form nor his range of emotion was to be compared with Wolf's for width and completeness.

[We hope that in a further article Mr. Newman will complete his argument by showing how Wolf unifies verbal and musical phraseology.—Ed., *M. T.*]

THE GROWTH OF BRITISH REPERTORY.

By REGINALD R. BUCKLEY.

We have been warned for some time past that the building of a National Opera House must not precede the existence of the repertory to be performed therein. But no one has been kind enough to explain how a repertory can beget itself. In practice things are working very well. The co-operation of Mr. Beecham with Mr. Courtneidge will guarantee to London the supply of more or less standard works. And translators of the calibre of Mr. Edward Dent (in Mozart) should be able to purge the texts of many absurdities.

Outside the London theatre original production has been started at Glastonbury, where, in the inadequate Assembly Rooms, experiments are being made. Being experiments, much can be learned from them. After the War it is hoped that a theatre, properly shaped and equipped with hidden orchestra and double stage will lead to productions of a simple kind that will pass any critical test. Meanwhile the difficulties are so great that the workmanlike performance of several new music-dramas must be taken as a promise of a real future.

For the benefit of musicians, who at times are given to form parties for and against 'legendary drama,' 'nationalism,' 'metaphysics in music,' and other matters, I propose to show exactly how and why these works have come into being. Also I shall try to give practical suggestions as to the enlargement of the range of music-drama.